

Meynell, Alice
Christiana (Thompson)
A father of women

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A FATHER OF WOMEN
AND OTHER POEMS

by
Alice Meynell

BURNS & OATES Ltd
28 Orchard Street
London W

Price Two Shillings net

PRINTED IN ENGLAND
BY W. H. SMITH & SON
THE ARDEN PRESS
STAMFORD STREET S.E.

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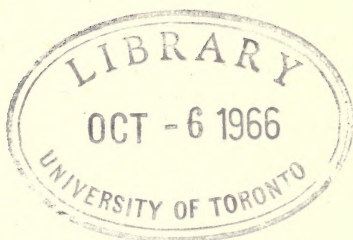
First published: September, 1917.
Reprinted: October, 1917.

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A FATHER OF WOMEN

AD SOROREM E. B.

"Thy father was transfused into thy blood."
Dryden : Ode to Mrs. Anne Killigrew.

O UR father works in us,
The daughters of his manhood. Not
undone
Is he, not wasted, though transmuted thus,
And though he left no son.

Therefore on him I cry
To arm me : "For my delicate mind a casque,
A breastplate for my heart, courage to die,
Of thee, captain, I ask.

"Nor strengthen only ; press
A finger on this violent blood and pale,
Over this rash will let thy tenderness
A while pause, and prevail.

"And shepherd-father, thou
Whose staff folded my thoughts before my birth,
Control them now I am of earth, and now
Thou art no more of earth.

A Father of Women

“ O liberal, constant, dear !
Crush in my nature the ungenerous art
Of the inferior ; set me high, and here,
Here garner up thy heart.”

Like to him now are they,
The million living fathers of the War—
Mourning the crippled world, the bitter day—
Whose striplings are no more.

The crippled world ! Come then,
Fathers of women with your honour in trust ;
Approve, accept, know them daughters of men,
Now that your sons are dust.

LENGTH OF DAYS

TO THE EARLY DEAD IN BATTLE

THERE is no length of days
But yours, boys who were children once.
Of old
The Past beset you in your childish ways,
With sense of Time untold !

What have you then forgone ?
A history ? This you had. Or memories ?
These, too, you had of your far-distant dawn.
No further dawn seems his,

The old man who shares with you,
But has no more, no more. Time's mystery
Did once for him the most that it can do :
He has had infancy.

And all his dreams, and all
His loves for mighty Nature, sweet and few,
Are but the dwindling past he can recall
Of what his childhood knew.

He counts not any more
His brief, his present years. But O he knows
How far apart the summers were of yore,
How far apart the snows.

Length of Days

Therefore be satisfied ;
Long life is in your treasury ere you fall ;
Yes, and first love, like Dante's. O a bride
For ever mystical !

Irrevocable good,—
You dead, and now about, so young, to die,—
Your childhood was ; there Space, there Multi-
tude,
There dwelt Antiquity.

NURSE EDITH CAVELL

Two o'clock, the morning of October 12th, 1915.

TO her accustomed eyes
The midnight-morning brought not
such a dread
As thrills the chance-awakened head that lies
In trivial sleep on the habitual bed.

'Twas yet some hours ere light ;
And many, many, many a break of day
Had she outwatched the dying ; but this night
Shortened her vigil was, briefer the way.

By dial of the clock
'Twas day in the dark above her lonely head.
" This day thou shalt be with Me." Ere the
cock
Announced that day she met the Immortal
Dead.

SUMMER IN ENGLAND, 1914

O N London fell a clearer light ;
Caressing pencils of the sun
Defined the distances, the white
Houses transfigured one by one,
The "long, unlovely street" impearled.
O what a sky has walked the world !

Most happy year ! And out of town
The hay was prosperous, and the wheat ;
The silken harvest climbed the down ;
Moon after moon was heavenly-sweet
Stroking the bread within the sheaves,
Looking twixt apples and their leaves.

And while this rose made round her cup,
The armies died convulsed. And when
This chaste young silver sun went up
Softly, a thousand shattered men,
One wet corruption, heaped the plain,
After a league-long throb of pain.

Flower following tender flower ; and birds,
And berries ; and benignant skies
Made thrive the serried flocks and herds.—
Yonder are men shot through the eyes.
Love, hide thy face
From man's unpardonable race.

Summer in England, 1914

.
Who said " No man hath greater love than this,
To die to serve his friend " ?

So these have loved us all unto the end.

Chide thou no more, O thou unsacrificed !
The soldier dying dies upon a kiss,
The very kiss of Christ.

TO TINTORETTO IN VENICE

The Art of Painting had in the Primitive years looked with the light, not towards it. Before Tintoretto's date, however, many painters practised shadows and lights, and turned more or less sunwards ; but he set the figure between himself and a full sun. His work is to be known in Venice by the splendid trick of an occluded sun and a shadow thrown straight at the spectator.

Tintoretto's thronged "Procession to Calvary" and his "Crucifixion," incidentally named, are two of the greatest of his multitude of works in Venice.

MASTER, thy enterprise,
Magnificent, magnanimous, was well
done,
Which seized the head of Art, and turned
her eyes—
The simpleton—and made her front the sun.

Long had she sat content,
Her young unlessoned back to a morning gay,
To a solemn noon, to a cloudy firmament,
And looked upon a world in gentle day.

But thy imperial call
Bade her to stand with thee and breast the light,
And therefore face the shadows, mystical,
Sombre, translucent, vestiges of night,

To Tintoretto in Venice

Yet glories of the day.

Eagle ! we know thee by thy undaunted eyes
Sky-ward, and by thy glooms ; we know thy way
Ambiguous, and those halo-misted dyes.

Thou Cloud, the bridegroom's friend
(The bridegroom sun) ! Master, we know thy
sign :

A mystery of hues world-without-end ;
And hide-and-seek of gamesome and divine ;

Shade of the noble head
Cast hitherward upon the noble breast ;
Human solemnities thrice hallowèd ;
The haste to Calvary, the Cross at rest.

Look sunward, Angel, then !
Carry the fortress-heavens by that hand ;
Still be the interpreter of suns to men ;
And shadow us, O thou Tower ! for thou shalt
stand.

A THRUSH BEFORE DAWN

A VOICE peals in this end of night
A phrase of notes resembling stars,
Single and spiritual notes of light.
What call they at my window-bars ?
The South, the past, the day to be,
An ancient infelicity.

Darkling, deliberate, what sings
This wonderful one, alone, at peace ?
What wilder things than song, what things
Sweeter than youth, clearer than Greece,
Dearer than Italy, untold
Delight, and freshness centuries old ?

And first first-loves, a multitude,
The exaltation of their pain ;
Ancestral childhood long renewed ;
And midnights of invisible rain ;
And gardens, gardens, night and day,
Gardens and childhood all the way.

What Middle Ages passionate,
O passionless voice ! What distant bells
Lodged in the hills, what palace state
Illyrian ! For it speaks, it tells,
Without desire, without dismay,
Some morrow and some yesterday.

A Thrush Before Dawn

All-natural things ! But more—Whence came

This yet remoter mystery ?

How do these starry notes proclaim

A graver still divinity ?

This hope, this sanctity of fear ?

O innocent throat ! O human ear !

THE TWO SHAKESPEARE TERCENTENARIES:

OF BIRTH, 1864: OF DEATH, 1916.

TO SHAKESPEARE

LONGER than thine, than thine,
Is now my time of life ; and thus thy years
Seem to be clasped and harboured within
mine.

O how ignoble this my clasp appears !

Thy unprophetic birth,
Thy darkling death : living I might have seen
That cradle, marked those labours, closed that
earth.

O first, O last, O infinite between !

Now that my life has shared
Thy dedicated date, O mortal, twice,
To what all-vain embrace shall be compared
My lean enclosure of thy paradise ?

To ignorant arms that fold
A poet to a foolish breast ? The Line,
That is not, with the world within its hold ?
So, days with days, my days encompass thine.

Child, Stripling, Man—the sod.
Might I talk little language to thee, pore
On thy last silence ? O thou city of God,
My waste lies after thee, and lies before.

TO O—, OF HER DARK EYES

A CROSS what calm of tropic seas,
'Neath alien clusters of the nights,
Looked, in the past, such eyes as these ?
Long-quenched, relumed, ancestral lights !

The generations fostered them ;
And steadfast Nature, secretwise—
Thou seedling child of that old stem—
Kindled anew thy dark-bright eyes.

Was it a century or two
This lovely darkness rose and set,
Occluded by grey eyes and blue,
And Nature feigning to forget ?

Some grandam gave a hint of it—
So cherished was it in thy race,
So fine a treasure to transmit
In its perfection to thy face.

Some father to some mother's breast
Entrusted it, unknowing. Time
Implied, or made it manifest,
Bequest of a forgotten clime.

Hereditary eyes ! But this
Is single, singular, apart :—
New-made thy love, new-made thy kiss,
New-made thy errand to my heart.

THE TREASURE

THREE times have I beheld
Fear leap in a babe's face, and take his
breath,
Fear, like the fear of old
That knows the price of life, the name of death.

What is it justifies
This thing, this dread, this fright that has no
tongue,
The terror in those eyes
When only eyes can speak—they are so young ?

Not yet those eyes had wept.
What does fear cherish that it locks so well ?
What fortress is thus kept ?
Of what is ignorant terror sentinel ?

And pain in the poor child,
Monstrously disproportionate, and dumb
In the poor beast, and wild
In the old decorous man, caught, overcome ?

Of what the outposts these ?
Of what the fighting guardians ? What demands
That sense of menaces,
And then such flying feet, imploring hands ?

The Treasure

Life : There's nought else to seek ;
Life only, little prized ; but by design
Of Nature prized. How weak,
How sad, how brief ! O how divine, divine !

A WIND OF CLEAR WEATHER IN ENGLAND

O WHAT a miracle wind is this
Has crossed the English land to-day
With an unprecedented kiss,
And wonderfully found a way !

Unsmirched incredibly and clean,
Between the towns and factories,
Avoiding, has his long flight been,
Bringing a sky like Sicily's.

O fine escape, horizon pure
As Rome's ! Black chimneys left and right,
But not for him, the straight, the sure,
His luminous day, his spacious night.

How keen his choice, how swift his feet !
Narrow the way and hard to find !
This delicate stepper and discreet
Walked not like any worldly wind.

Most like a man in man's own day,
One of the few, a perfect one :
His open earth—the single way ;
His narrow road—the open sun.

IN SLEEP

I DREAMT (no "dream" awake—a dream indeed)

A wrathful man was talking in the park :
"Where are the Higher Powers, who know our
need

And leave us in the dark ?

"There are no Higher Powers ; there is no heart
In God, no love"—his oratory here,
Taking the paupers' and the cripples' part,
Was broken by a tear.

And then it seemed that One who did create
Compassion, who alone invented pity,
Walked, as though called, in at that north-east
gate,

Out from the muttering city ;

Threaded the little crowd, trod the brown grass,
Bent o'er the speaker close, saw the tear rise,
And saw Himself, as one looks in a glass,
In those impassioned eyes.

THE DIVINE PRIVILEGE

LORD, where are Thy prerogatives ?
Why, men have more than Thou hast
kept ;
The king rewards, remits, forgives,
The poet to a throne has stept.

And Thou, despoiled, hast given away
Worship to men, success to strife,
Thy glory to the heavenly day,
And made Thy sun the lord of life.

Is one too precious to impart,
One property reserved to Christ ?
One, cherished, grappled to that heart ?
—To be alone the Sacrificed ?

O Thou who lovest to redeem,
One whom I know lies sore oppressed.
Thou wilt not suffer me to dream
That I can bargain for her rest.

Seven hours I swiftly sleep, while she
Measures the leagues of dark, awake.
O that my dewy eyes might be
Parched by a vigil for her sake !

The Divine Privilege

But O rejected ! O in vain !

I cannot give who would not keep.

I cannot buy, I cannot gain,

I cannot give her half my sleep.

FREE WILL

DEAR are some hidden things
My soul has sealed in silence ; past
delights,
Hope unconfessed ; desires with hampered wings,
Remembered in the nights.

But my best treasures are
Ignoble, undelightful, abject, cold ;
Yet O ! profounder hoards oracular
No reliquaries hold.

There lie my trespasses,
Abjured but not disowned. I'll not accuse
Determinism, nor, as the Master * says,
Charge even " the poor Deuce."

Under my hand they lie,
My very own, my proved iniquities ;
And though the glory of my life go by
I hold and garner these.

How else, how elsewhere,
How otherwise, shall I discern and grope
For lowliness ? How hate, how love, how dare,
How weep, how hope ?

* George Meredith.

THE TWO QUESTIONS

“ **A** RIDDLING world ! ” one cried.
“ If pangs must be, would God that they
were sent
To the impure, the cruel, and passed aside
The holy innocent ! ”

But I, “ Ah no, no, no !
Not the clean heart transpierced ; not tears that
fall
For a child’s agony ; not a martyr’s woe ;
Not these, not these appal.

“ Not docile motherhood,
Dutiful, frequent, closed in all distress ;
Not shedding of the unoffending blood ;
Not little joy grown less ;

“ Not all-benign old age
With dotage mocked ; not gallantry that faints
And still pursues ; not the vile heritage
Of sin’s disease in saints ;

“ Not these defeat the mind.
For great is that abjection, and august
That irony. Submissive we shall find
A splendour in that dust.

The Two Questions

“ Not these puzzle the will ;
Not these the yet unanswered question urge.
But the unjust stricken ; but the hands that kill
Lopped ; but the merited scourge ;

“ The sensualist at fast ;
The merciless felled ; the liar in his snares.
The cowardice of my judgment sees, aghast,
The flail, the chaff, the tares.”

THE LORD'S PRAYER

"*Audemus dicere 'Pater Noster.'*"—CANON OF THE
MASS.

THERE is a bolder way,
There is a wilder enterprise than this
All-human iteration day by day.
Courage, mankind ! Restore Him what is His.

Out of His mouth were given
These phrases. O replace them whence they
came.
He, only, knows our inconceivable "Heaven,"
Our hidden "Father," and the unspoken
"Name" ;

Our "trespasses," our "bread,"
The "will" inexorable yet implored ;
The miracle-words that are and are not said,
Charged with the unknown purpose of their Lord.

"Forgive," "give," "lead us not"—
Speak them by Him, O man the unaware,
Speak by that dear tongue, though thou know
not what,
Shuddering through the paradox of prayer.

EASTER NIGHT

ALL night had shout of men and cry
Of woeful women filled His way ;
Until that noon of sombre sky
On Friday, clamour and display
Smote Him ; no solitude had He,
No silence, since Gethsemane.

Public was Death ; but Power, but Might,
But Life again, but Victory,
Were hushed within the dead of night,
The shutter'd dark, the secrecy.
And all alone, alone, alone
He rose again behind the stone.

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It is the peculiar characteristic of Mrs. Meynell's poetry that it is itself creative. Its grace and beauty are the flower, not only of her life, but of her contemplation of life. Her very daydreams are lit with the light of day. Her feelings spring from her mind, her thoughts from her heart. There is room in them for a wit that is the weapon of the rarest tenderness. The loveliest poem is lovely for its own sake only. Its own life is all that one need ask of it. But still the question may arise for what sake else it is precious, what of true wisdom, of vision, of the life within? And Mrs. Meynell's books have taken their chosen, quiet, unfaltering way—too lofty a way for ease or weariness or absent-mindedness to follow. She is sure; and now, however the winds of the world may blow, the vane, lit with a westering sun, points always to the East.—*Times*.

Mrs. Meynell found herself long ago, and was found by all English-speaking lovers of poetry. That her work should undergo transformation was out of the question; but it would not be hers if its recluse and esoteric inspiration had made no response to the appeal of topics that make the staple of England's daily thought. Yet the great national issues are often divined rather than seen as we traverse the subtle avenues of intimate soul-life in which her mystic genius is peculiarly at home. Thus the title-poem, addressed to her sister, Lady Butler, has the air at the outset, of a purely personal commemoration of

A FATHER OF WOMEN AND OTHER POEMS

their father. The spiritual bond between father and daughter could not be more exquisitely touched. But the larger background of her thought presently emerges. This father of women left no son. And now, when the world is crippled of its sons, its women are called to remember that they are "daughters of men," to rise to the need and fill the empty place.—*Manchester Guardian*.

She writes on the Shakspeare Tercentenaries. So did ten thousand other poets. They boxed the compass of the obvious as to the manner born—which indeed most of them were. Only two writers, Mr. Thomas Hardy and Mrs. Meynell, broke silence because they had something to say. And Mrs. Meynell's reflections on the fact that she had lived through the Tercentenaries of Shakspeare's birth and death, and might, with such length of days, have seen him in his cradle and closed the earth on him, the image of that magnificence and fullness thus enclosed as it were within her own comparative waste (as she sees it) are very characteristic of her inability to write like a hack. She has a poem on the Early Dead in Battle. Her mind travels its own road, and she discovers to us, surprisingly but convincingly, that he who dies in early manhood has actually the *longest* part of life behind him, and that time is never so long and joy never so deep as in childhood, and that, as we grow old, the later years seem more fleeting and less full. A thinker so conscientious is never in danger of polishing nothings. All her work is of one piece; and, at its finest, it is of its kind perfect.—J. C. SQUIRE in *Land and Water*.

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